VIBRANT COSMOPOLITANISM OR UNDERSTATED AUSTRALIAN: AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE PRACTICE IN THE 'SPACE-IN-BETWEEN'.

Professor Helen Armstrong, School of Planning, Landscape Architecture and Surveying, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. October 1998.

Landscape architectural practice should be a site for insurgency rather than its more common state as a site of paranoia. Anarchy and parodic anti-heroes are a strong part of Australian culture but has Australian landscape practice lived up to this? Australian landscape practice reflects the dilemma of much of Australian cultural production. It is caught between either representing the stimulating peculiarities of the local world or trying to impress the unassailable indifference of the major global metropolis.[1] A challenge lies in making art of this dilemma. Some creative forms of Australian cultural production have explored a defiant vernacular. Others have tried to occupy the 'space-in–between', [2] but most landscape practice in Australia are versions of European or American practice. There is, however, an emerging form of landscape practice which reflects Australia's cosmopolitanism, namely the cosmopolitanism derived form a much travelled populace, who is engaged in debates about identity and has a healthy scepticism about strident certainties. In parallel with the defiant vernacular, the incipient cosmospolitanism and the ersatz global is another form of practice, which can be described as 'understated Australian'.

There are two exciting sites for discourse on the discipline of landscape architecture; Kerb magazine and the Australasian Students of Landscape Architecture's conferences. At the EDGE 2 Conference in Melbourne in 1993, Beth Meyer introduced a particular critique of landscape architectural theory. She suggested that landscape architects look at the 'space-in-between' the established binary opposites. She urged the discipline to challenge the closure of such binary opposites as man: woman; nature: culture; global: local; and that we look at the space in between - the space of hybrids and cyborgs [3]. I would like to extend Beth Meyer's position by suggesting that Australian landscape practice explore the co-existence of paradoxical views. This is the inclusive state of cosmopolitanism.

There are some landscape architectural critics who see such a position as being merely all things to all people. There are other landscape architects who see themselves as marginalised others, constantly denied a voice in the mainstream discourse of architects and engineers. However, there are also many landscape architects who refuse to be marginalised victims and instead, see being marginal as being in a position of strength. Not being locked into the rules of the mainstream creates a space for innovation and ingenuity. It also creates a space for subversive anarchy which, in Australia, is always richly embued with humour.

Perhaps the most limiting factor for landscape architectural practice is the unquestioning acceptance of the picturesque. In working with nature, unlike modernist architects and artists, landscape architects did not challenge the picturesque. Even during the questioning associated with postmodernism, the picturesque was only played with and not fully deconstructed.

Let us look at this term 'Cosmopolitanism'. Paul Kelly in a recent *Weekend Australian* quoted Hugh Mackey's survey which suggests that 'Australians love to be seen as cosmopolitan'. [4] Mackey argues that being cosmopolitan sounds exciting and when Australians are referred to as cosmopolitan they 'swell with pride.' However cosmopolitanism is not something that one can merely wish to be. It is a state that is achieved. It is a way of being. This is in strong

contrast to multiculturalism which is a contested political policy, as much contested by Aboriginal Australians as it is by racist white Australians.

Although many associate cosmopolitanism with the sophistication of 19th century Vienna, it is interesting to look at the origins of the word. The term 'Cosmopolitanism' goes back to the 4th century BC when the Stoics questioned the traditional Greek presumption that there were only two types of people - the Greeks and the barbarians. In contrast the Stoics referred to themselves as 'cosmopolitan' implying that their polis or the city state included the cosmos or the whole world. This was a direct challenge to the Greek assumption that they were racially and linguistically superior to all others. The Stoics argued that, on the contrary, all people share one common reason and that a true Stoic is not a citizen of any state but is a citizen of the world. To be cosmopolitan is to be inclusive of all.

Are Australian landscape architects Greeks, Barbarians or Stoic Cosmopolitans?

Australians tend to see themselves as cut off from major world cities and marginalised from mainstream cultural movements. It may surprise many Australians to be considered cosmopolitan. I suggest that Australians have incipient qualities, which have created a particular form of cosmopolitanism. Post 1788, non-Aboriginal Australians have consistently questioned established hegemonies. Australians have tended to be inclusive with a modicum of humility and, despite an uncomfortable history of racism towards Aboriginal Australians and occasional ugly bouts of white racism, there have been long periods of tolerance. The precedents for this form of cosmopolitanism are an historical accident. The non-Aboriginal beginning was essentially as a group of marginals - either as unsuccessful East End Londoners who were caught carrying out their petty thefts, or rebel Irish or the 3rd sons of gentry who were relegated to the Navy or the public service. This marginality has prevented Australians from whole heartedly re-enacting British culture as a certainty , i.e. unquestioned and racially superior. On the surface it looks as if Australians replicated colonial British culture but scratch the surface and you find a healthy anarchy, particularly reflected in the parodic anti heroes.

Has Australian Landscape Practice lived up to this particular type of anarchy?

Landscape practice in Australia in the 19th century was, of course, strongly influenced by the British. It was also influenced by other things, particularly the fascination with Australian plants which resulted in the unusual situation where the designers of the major public parks were the directors of the botanic gardens. The influence of the great German botanists, Baron Von Mueller and Dr Schomberg were equally as important an influence on the design of the public domain as the work of Repton and the writings of J.C. Loudon. Although one could say that Australian landscape practice in the 19th century and probably into the mid 20th century was emulating the mainstream design practice of Britain with a heavy overlay of nationalistic fervour about Australian plants, the seeds of cosmopolitanism had been sown. Italian hydraulic engineers had laid out the irrigated landscape of the MIA, Chinese market gardens had provisioned the Australia since the 1850s, German settlements had created distinctively different cultural landscapes in Harndorf, SA and Maleny, Qld, and the Beaux Art influences of turn of the century America were evident in the design of Canberra and Griffith.

The factors which contributed to the emerging cosmopolitanism, namely the different cultures within Australia, and the healthy scepticism about authority and mainstream values include yet another aspect about cosmopolitanism. Australians travel. At every socio-economic level

Australians have travelled. The tyranny of distance has not resulted in inward focussed parochialism. Instead Australians have sought to reduce the impact of distance by connecting back to Europe and Asia with repeated trips overseas. They have also travelled extensive within Australia, particularly the internal movements of the central Europeans and Mediterranean Australians from the North Queensland cane fields to the southern cities and from the Western Australian gold fields to the eastern cities.

Thus by the mid 20th century Australian landscape practice reflected particularly Australian cultural values. Such values were the result of a number of factors. Landscape design was still constrained by an essentially British model but was frequently practiced by people who had travelled to different countries or by migrants who brought other ways of doing things such as Paul Sorensen from Denmark and Dr Karl Langer from Austria. As well, both mainstream Anglo -Celts and the migrants from other countries, European and Asian, had developed a strong culture of ingenuity, trying to work with what was here and trying to understand the land and its stimulating peculiarities. Despite this, by the mid 20th century the Aboriginal people had still not been consulted about the mysteries of the land. This was not to occur until the 1990s.

Because Australian landscape practice prior to the 1960s was still constrained to parks and gardens, it was less culpable for the widespread damage to the Australian landscape so evident by the 1880s to the present. Instead, landscape practice had become more closely aligned with the other arts such as writing, painting, sculpture and music by the 1950s. As the writer Nicholas Jose points out in his essay, ' Cultural Identity: I Think I am Something Else.',

> *Australian allegiances have been divided between the stimulating peculiarities of their local world and the unassailably indifferent metropolis*[London, New York]. *They have been spurred on, and daunted, by conflicting challenges: to find a voice for their new land and to attain the highest standards of the old. Some have stayed at home to forge a defiant vernacular. Others heard the siren call of a more refined civilisation and remade themselves as Europeans. But most, and perhaps the best, made art out of their dilemma.* [5]

Have Australian Landscape Architects made art out of their dilemma?

Nicholas Jose's proposition about the dilemma associated with the Australian identity can certainly be seen in Australian landscape practice. Since the 1960s, Australian landscape practice has been caught between the stimulating peculiarities of our local bushland and the unassailable indifference about Australian landscape practice in the metropolis - Paris, Barcelona, New York. As a discipline we also reflect the two ways suggested by Nicholas Jose of handling the conflicting challenges, namely to find a voice for the new land and to attain the highest standards of the old. Some landscape architects stayed at home and forge a defiant vernacular. Others heard the siren call from a more refined civilisation and have remade themselves as Europeans or Americans.

Those who stayed at home to forge a new vernacular flowered in the 1970s - Alistair Knox in Melbourne, Bruce Mc Kenzie in Sydney, Harry Howard working in Sydney and Canberra, Mike Ewings working in Central Australia and Sydney and Jean Versheur in Western Australia - are some of the main icons of Australian landscape practice in the 1970s and early 1980s. Some local heroes such as Craig Burton did not stay at home but travelled as an artist returning to

forge an Australian vernacular differently, namely through an historical understanding of the cultural landscape.

Those who heard the siren call from Britain and Europe came back to Australia with sensibilities more in accord with the great 18th century garden tradition so enigmatically represented by the work of Richard Clough's work in Canberra and Mt Wilson. There were those who heard a younger, seductive siren calling from the heady modernist American world. They went to study the new scientific ways of looking at landscape and came back with plans the colour of liquid sky. Bruce Rickard, and the late Lindsay Robertson were some of the early disciples of Ian McHarg urging us all to 'Design with Nature'.

In many ways these three approaches to Australian landscape practice were not in conflict. Whether vernacular Australian, classical British or newly American , they all were committed to the principles of the picturesque. It took the first graduates from the under-graduate course at UNSW and later from RMIT to challenge the hegemony of the picturesque. Spurred on by the Post Modern historicism - Bicentennial Park in Sydney embraced the Beaux Arts axiality, a heresy for those imbued with British landscape sensibilities. Lorna Harrison and Lionel Glendenning worked playfully with historicist references in addressing the now ever present problem - the toxic site. While the element appeared playful and possibly superficial, the underlying plan was a sophisticated and highly resolved technical solution.

The Bicentennial year,1988, provided the opportunity for Australians to become more aware of their cosmopolitanism which until then had been largely unselfconscious. Oi Choong contributed Malaysian-Australian design sensibilities while heading up the Environment Section of the NSW Public Works. Included in this team was an interesting range of new young landscape architects, educated in Australia but reflecting the cosmopolitan influences of the late 1980s. Ingrid Mather's Mt Annan Botanic Garden, Geoffrey Britten's Mt Tomah Botanic Garden and Oi Choong's Circular Quay and Macquarie St designs were just some of the interesting projects emerging from NSW Public Works in 1988. The 1980s were also marked by landscape architecture extending into the area of urban design. Perhaps a landscape practice, TRACT, winning the Newcastle foreshore development competition was the beginning of the recognition that landscape architects were one of the many players in urban design. Unfortunately, most of the landscape architectural interventions during the 1980s were street malls, often undertaken for tourism and the heritage industry. For Australian landscape architects, the 1980s was about commercialism - landscapes for consumers - places in which to shop. Perhaps it was cosmopolitanism or perhaps it was only the global flâneur. [6] But the consumerist party of the 1980s was over by the early 1990s and Australian landscape practice had to come back to the difficult task of working with communities and working with environmental problems. This called for different skills - the easy going skills of the understated Australian. This was a difficult transition for many who had been caught up in the heady urban designs of the 1980s.

By the early 1990s, the Australian community was recognising something else. In this rich mixture created by confusion about identity, a much travelled populace, a healthy scepticism about strident certainties, there emerged a new maturity; namely the acceptance of the wrongs done to the Aboriginal people and a desire to understand Aboriginal land practice. To quote David Tacey and Tim Flannery, Australians are in the early stages of becoming 'aboriginalised' by the Australian landscape. [7]

Also in the early 1990s, there was a marked re-evaluation of design. The French philosophers presented contemporary cultural criticisms which could not be ignored. It was time to look at the people and places which had been pushed into the background during the 1980s. Landscapes, natural systems and disadvantaged people had paid a high price for the 1980s party. It was clear that new forms of collaboration were needed. Also needed were new ways of thinking which could challenge the modernist certainties.

Australian landscape practice was quick to embrace collaborations with artists as a way of searching for answers to some of intractable problems. Problems of toxic sites, the problems of unemployment, problems of disadvantaged remote communities, and the problems of rural environmental damage were just some of the many issues. An early program to take on this challenge occurred in NSW, initiated by the Arts Council and the Schools of Landscape Architecture, Architecture and Fine Arts at UNSW. Professional and student teams of landscape architects, architects, and artists worked with rural communities to generate new answers through landscape and environmental design in the 'Creative Village' program. This program included landscape architects such as Bill Royal and Lindy Hulton working as landscape architects and artists with the remote community in Brewarrina, NSW to develop environmental games as a way to deal with literacy problems as the first stage in community design. As well, landscape architects Anton James and Melissa Wilson worked for a town plagued with salination problems in south west NSW. Anton James developed an innovative system to animate derelict railway land while still maintaining rail as a viable future option. Another example included Barbara Schaffer, Jason Zlotlowski and Peter Bristow working as landscape architects with a rural community to develop new intensive agricultural products to be processed locally for niche markets. Similar collaborations were encouraged by the Australia Council's *Coastwise Program*, of which the students in the landscape program at UWA were early participants.

Other artist /landscape architecture collaborations related to environmental design include the 'Restoring the Waters' Project in Sydney with landscape architects, Barbara Schaffer, Sue Barnsley , and artists, Jenny Turpin and Michaela Crawford. Embracing environmental design as a way to address urban water management is one of the exciting initiatives in Australian landscape practice. The other evocative form of environmentally sensitive design relates to the new native grass designs - often occupying highly public and prestigious areas. The artist/landscape architect collaborations have been a fundamental change in the nature of Australian landscape practice in the 1990s. These are the facets of cosmopolitanism which have led to a vibrant form of landscape practice, whether it is the playful interventions in large city parks such as 'Art in the Park' in Sydney's Centennial Park or the ironic commentaries generated by Melbourne's urban sculptures. In these projects the landscape architect and the artist seamlessly interchange.

Yet another exciting form of collaboration has been the Design Competition. Australians, in particular Richard Weller, Vlad Sitta and Anton James have played a vital role in establishing the value of the design competition as part of mainstream landscape design practice.

But what about Queensland? NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia have all been mentioned, but what about landscape practice in Queensland? Is it an example of vibrant cosmopolitanism or does it exemplify the understated Australian? Or is it something else? Who is responsible for all those resorts and simulacra of other places which typify the Gold Coast and the Northern Queensland coastal resorts? According to the practitioners in Queensland, few landscape architects and even fewer Australian landscape architects. It

would appear that most of the Gold Coast resort designs are done by Hawaiian landscape practices, with a few being done by international practices in Australia such as Belt Collins. Interestingly, Queensland practice is not the stereotyped 'white shoe brigade' that Southerners think it is. Current Queensland practice, in fact, exemplifies the understated Australian. The wonderful exuberance of the Big Banana seems to have been replaced by a new restraint. Many of the practices do a large amount of hidden work - infrastructure work for transport corridors, management plans for parks and open space areas, visual management of heritage landscapes, highway remediation work and beach restoration work. A number of the current practitioners are graduates from QUT - the so called *University for the Real World* - where the culture of stewardship, management and conservation is quite strong. Some interesting work is also coming out of the Landscape and Urban Design sections of Brisbane City Council. Many of the projects are small scale urban interventions undertaken to revitalise existing shopping precincts as viable community centres able to compete with the vast shopping Hyper-dromes in the edge suburbs. The Queensland projects are not the intellectual challenges emerging from Melbourne or the sophisticated and contentious designs being generated in Sydney. The Brisbane designs are understated, they are small in scale and do not reflect the image of the Gold Coast, Sanctuary Cove or Port Douglas.

Thus Australian landscape practice can be considered cosmopolitan but is it vibrant? Where are the vibrant cosmopolitan places? They are in the major cities but they are not the result of designers. The vibrancy comes from the way many different people are using the places. Those areas of Australian landscape design which can be considered cosmopolitan come from their inclusiveness and their willingness to question and not accept the mainstream design, political or developer hegemony.

Nevertheless, aspects of Australian landscape practice are vibrant even if that vibrancy takes the form of kitsch. Australian landscape practice ranges from the good to mundane new housing and urban infill, from the exciting new urban projects for the Olympic city to the stewardship of our coastlines and wetlands, from the good to the mundane town centre designs and from the challenging urban interventions in Melbourne to the romantic and picturesque designs for inland nature parks.

But interestingly there is an equally strong current of understated design. Landscape architects such as the Queenslander, Stephen Pate, work with developers, suggesting minor changes, encouraging them to see the landscape as something more than speculative real estate. Stephen Pate comments in a quiet and laconic manner that 'they all have a sensitive nerve somewhere; it is just a matter of trying to find it. You can often find it by talking about the future for their children.' Glenn Thomas, another Queenslander, has created the ultimate understated design in his golf course for the people of Birdsville where he used nothing but the local material and the subtle desert natural systems.

All of this sounds exemplary, so how is it that so many of the landscape designs we see do not reflect cosmopolitanism, nor are they understated or even overstated Australia? Why is it that so much of our urban landscape designs look like cultural monocultures - the global everyplace? Why are Australian suburbs and large rural towns sprouting universal streetscape solutions and the same shopping mall simulacra? Maybe it is because landscape architects are a minority. Our impact on the landscapes is quite minimal. But one cannot deny the proliferation of mundane and predictable designs. Maybe we should look at Patrick White's observation. Speaking of what he considered our inherent mediocrity he uses a character in Voss to remark

> *I am confident that the mediocrity... is not a final and irrevocable state. Rather it is a creative source of endless variety and subtlety. The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation on the rainbow.* [8]

Perhaps the answer to the future of landscape practice in Australia lies in Beth Meyer's challenge delivered at EDGE2. Are we effectively using the space-in-between? Are we creatively using the position of being the marginal other? Or are many of us guilty of embracing the mainstream with a Faustian bargain for economic long life. As this rapid overview has shown, along with mainstream designers, there are practitioners who have chosen to work in the space-in-between because it is a productive space, an insurgent space, and an effective space of resistance.

I would suggest it is in this space that we need to search for community and environmental sustainability through new forms of employment possibly related to new ways of using the land. We need to recognise, however, that there is a trap in the picturesque. The picturesque idealises traditional values - the territory of the ancient Greeks. To be truly cosmopolitan we need to see the problems not screen them with visual management. We need to come up with new landscapes which are productive, sustainable and employ people. This is the inclusive field that W.EDGE, the 1997 student conference, has called for. This is the space for the W.EDGE themes of discrimination, discernment and reflection. I would call for the next EDGE conference in 1999 to create a forum in which such new landscapes could be discussed. Perhaps it could ask, *What form - what hybrids or cyborgs - will such landscapes take?*

Endnotes

1. Jose, N. 1985. 'Cultural Identity: I think I am Something Else' in *Australia: The Daedalus Symposium*. Angus and Robertson: Sydney. 311-342.
2. Meyer, E. 1994. 'Landscape Architecture as Modern Other and Postmodern Ground' in Edquist & Bird (eds). *The Culture of Landscape*. Edge Publishing: Melbourne. 13-34.
3. Ibid. 1994.25.
4. Kelly, P. 1997. 'The Curse of the M-Word' in *Weekend Australian.* Aug 30-31. 21
5. Jose. 1985. Op Cit. 312.
6. Vidler, A. 1978. 'The Scenes of the Street' in Anderson, S. (ed). *On Streets.* M.I.T: Cambridge. 98.
7. Flannery, T. 1994. The Future Eaters. Reed: Melbourne. And Tacey, D 1995. *The Edge of the Sacred*: *Transformation in Australia*. Harper Collins: Melbourne.
8. White, P. 1957. *Voss.* Penguin: Melbourne. 476.